

Officials consider commercial reptile collection ban in Nevada

By Ben Botkin
Review-Journal Capital Bureau
September 18, 2017

CARSON CITY — Commercial reptile collecting in Nevada may become banned, effectively ending a cottage industry of collectors who gather lizards and snakes from the desert landscape.

State wildlife officials are considering a ban or limit of the long-allowed practice of collecting reptiles for commercial uses. The proposed restrictions would limit where, when and what type of reptiles can be collected.

A ban or restrictions would greatly change the state's current system for commercial reptile collection. Nevada allows commercial reptile collectors to gather unlimited numbers of species, which concerns conservationists and state wildlife officials. In the past three decades, commercial collectors have reported removing more than 420,000 reptiles from Nevada.

A description of the potential regulations was released last week by the Nevada Department of Wildlife in advance of a Saturday meeting.

The state's Board of Wildlife Commissioners will discuss the issue and may advance a recommendation to a future meeting.

The proposals

Under a ban, hobbyists would be allowed to collect reptiles, Jennifer Newmark, the state's wildlife diversity administrator, wrote in a memo. A ban could be temporary or permanent.

"This regulation provides the strongest conservation of native reptiles and allows the most recovery potential of declining populations," she wrote.

The other possibility is limiting commercial collecting. Under that option, collectors could gather reptiles only during non-reproductive months: January through March and August through December.

They also would be limited to collecting 30 reptiles a day and have annual limits for different species.

Under either a ban or a restricted system, collectors could no longer gather some of the most commonly collected species. Those include desert iguanas, western chuckwallas, long-nosed leopard lizards, Great Basin collared lizards and desert horned lizards.

Collectors vs. the state

The state has fewer than 10 commercial reptile collectors.

One longtime collector, Thomas L. Bentz, a 57-year-old from Pahrump, called a ban or restrictions “difference without a distinction.”

He does most of his reptile collecting on dirt roads in rural Nevada. He said there continues to be an abundant supply of reptiles off roads along which he’s collected for years, which suggests a “stable harvest.”

Another problem he has: The restrictions would ban the reptiles most in demand, including chuckwallas. The quotas for the remaining reptiles are too low to offer any commercial value, he said.

Bentz said that on average he collects about 57 reptiles a day. Bentz doesn’t advocate for unlimited collecting and offered a proposal with an aggregate limit of 100 reptiles a day.

On the other side of the issue is the Center for Biological Diversity, which is pushing state wildlife officials to institute a full ban. The group’s Nevada state director, Patrick Donnelly, said the group will present the state with a letter signed by nearly 100 herpetologists promoting a complete ban.

“There’s really no justification for the continued commercial exploitation of Nevada’s wildlife in this way,” he said. “The scientific community believes a ban is the only way to go.”

Proposed annual limits

State wildlife officials could ban commercial reptile collecting or restrict it. One option is annual limits for each collector based on species. Some of the proposed limits:

—50 eastern fence lizards.

—50 Northern sagebrush lizards.

—30 zebra-tailed lizards.

—10 California kingsnakes.

—10 long-nosed snakes.

—5 Mojave rattlesnakes.

Source: Nevada Department of Wildlife.